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The Last Paragraph

C. R. Schabel

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THE LAST PARAGRAPH

by C.R. Schabel

The phone rang again, delaying her coffee break for the third time. On the night shift it was nearly impossible to maintain a high level of productivity without regular administrations of caffeine; but Ann Giovani (a small, pert beauty with raven-black hair) was the charge nurse and was responsible for answering and processing all incoming calls. So she dragged herself to the switchboard without the help of the blessed stimulant.

Physician's General Hospital was sending them another deadbeat. All non-homeowners without valid Blue-Cross cards were automatically transferred to County General Psychiatric regardless of their true mental state. In order to be eligible for care, however, a patient needed a psychiatric disorder. Consequently CCP's infirmary (its largest ward) was occupied with manic-depressives treated for acute appendicitis, schizophrenics choked with pneumonia, or even paranoids in advanced labor.

When the ambulance arrived from Physician's General, An had all the paperwork ready to be filled out, an intravenous drip stand set up, a full oxygen tank handy, and the on-duty doctor alerted.

The ambulance driver backed his vehicle to the receiving doors, then he and an attendant got out; they opened the back of the ambulance and unloaded the stretcher and patient. As they pushed him inside, the patient, an old man, screamed for his "work;" they informed him that it--a pair of old suitcases--would be looked after.

"It shall be looked after, by me!" he groaned, "so, unless you want me to rise and fight and perhaps dislodge this phenomenal band-aid that restricts my life's ebbing away, then I suggest that you fetch my belongings back to me instantly!"

"Doesn't talk like the typical wino," Giovani thought. Then she confronted the ambulance driver, intervened for the patient, and secured the old man's "work."

The patient was a street person and had been assaulted by another of the vagabond crowd who wanted his suitcases.

"My boundless gratitude to you dear lady," he said. "My very soul resides in that squalid luggage."

"Well, your soul weighs a ton," the ambulance driver complained.

"It's astonishing how massive paper can be," said the old man. Then he turned to Ann Giovani, caught hold of her hand and gently kissed it. "Though I'd prefer to talk with you informally, at a corner table, in my favorite bistro, I fear, instead, that we are due for an examination and a highly proper interview. And, much as even involuntary rudeness pains me, I must ask your indulgence on one thing: that we conduct our talk while I remain supine."

"Of course," she said, then got to work.

She took his vital signs (temperature, respiration rate, pulse and blood pressure) and found nothing alarming in them. Then she examined his wound. It was a long, slashing cut along the left abdominal wall, deep enough to draw blood but not to damage the internal organs. He'd need a dozen stitches and about five days rest.

The examination completed, she started the interview.

"Your name, sir?" she asked.

"Clayton Robert Samuelson," he said.

"And your last occupation?" She assumed he was unemployed.

"That's not so easily answered," he said. "By 'occupation' do you mean what I call my work, or what I labor at for money?"

"Whatever you prefer, Mr. Samuelson."

"First of all, I'd prefer that you call me Clay," he grinned through teeth that were white, well-cleaned and real.

"Clay," she repeated.

"Though 'Mud' would be a better name for me," he laughed. "I'm a writer by trade, a sweeper of floors and a washer of dishes by profession."

"I see." She wrote down his answers. "How old are you?"

"Seventy-four last May," he said, "and still hale and hearty; I'm sure to last another ten years, unless contrary measures are taken."

Ms. Giovani wrote down 'suicidal tendencies,' thus making him eligible for care at CCP.

Just then Dr. Tze arrived; she greeted her favorite nurse warmly, then took over the examination. Dr. Tze, though trained as a psychiatrist, had been getting more practice treating bodily ailments than mental ones. She and Ms. Giovani worked so well together that they became an impromptu crisis team, affectionately called "the Tiny Tornadoes."

After reading the nurse's notes and examining the wound, Dr. Tze said "Mr. Samuelson, I'm going to have to give you stitches, and I must ask you first, do you want general or local anesthesia?"

"Local, by all means, Madam Doctor. I wouldn't want to miss the performance of such a skilled physician."

"Why, thank you," the doctor replied. "I hope to live up to your high expectations."

Half an hour later, when the minor procedure was finished and extravagantly praised by Mr. Samuelson, Dr. Tze turned to Ann and said, "I should send all my low self-esteem patients to him."

"He does give the ego a boost," Ann replied, "but I

wonder if anyone looks after his ego's needs? He says he's a writer, but must scrub floors to make money."

"As long as I am here," Dr. Tze suggested, "I'll watch the desk. You go talk with him, until he sleeps."

Ann thanked the doctor, then got her notebook and returned to Mr. Samuelson. Since there was no internal damage, he could eat and drink normally, so Ann brought him some decaffeinated coffee. She sat down next to his bed and asked, "Do you feel up to a few more questions?"

"What would you like to know?" he replied.

"Just more about you, about your life, your philosophy if you like, and your writing; I'm a fervent reader."

Samuelson fortified himself with coffee. "There was an Indian term, 'Karma', that was in vogue awhile, in the sixties, do you remember it?"

"I was rather young then," she said.

"Karma, crudely defined, is what someone is supposed to learn from their lifetime(s); life's lessons," he explained. "By definition then, my karma, for this particular lifetime, is to learn about extreme humiliation, with a minor degree in frustration and disappointment."

"I see," she said pensively. "Is this because your books don't sell?"

He grinned at her. "Were it only so, my dear Ms. Giovani. You see, my books never had the chance to sell; none has ever been published. I've been writing for more than half a century, submitted a hundred and forty-three short stories, eighteen novels and twenty-four plays to publishers all over the world, to all major and minor houses of literature, and not once has any of them been printed. Only about half a dozen times have they even been read."

"Are your works highly controversial? Perhaps they offended the political or religious beliefs of the publishers," she asked.

"No, my stories are all harmless politically; they're about unicorns, Cyclops and other mythical creatures. They're written strictly for entertainment and nothing more."

"Have you thought of some other type of writing?" she asked. "I like murder mysteries myself."

"Me too. Some of them are well written," he said, "but a writer, like any sort of creative artist, must follow his inspirations–what the Muses send to him. And what the Muses have sent to me, what those she-devils have allured me into creating these past five decades, has been a lot of marketless fluff: plots and characters that moved my soul profoundly, but were as neutral as helium to those who controlled the printing presses. It was as if Calliope, Erato and their sisters were using me as a garbage disposal, a sewer for the creative impulses not meant for those in their true favor."

"Many artists are never recognized in their own time," the nurse said. "Consider Van Gogh..."

"And many more artists are never recognized at all," he said, "and the likelihood is that I will fall in the latter category, considering that my last contribution was returned to me–form letter attached–ten years ago, and I haven't mailed a story out since then."

She looked at his suitcases.

"Yes, they're in there," he said. "I carry them about with me, my stones of Sisyphus. I gave so much to them that I could never stand to be parted from them. There's much more of me in that luggage than there is left in this dried-up body."

"I see." She sat back and thought carefully about her next statement. "You're not bitter about it all; I find that remarkable."

His eyes fixed on hers sternly. "Ms. Giovani, I have bitterness that would make the herbs of a Passover table taste like Swiss chocolate. I hide it, but oh! the things I've thought of doing."

"Can you tell me about them?" she asked.

"To a psychiatric nurse," he said, "there is a certain danger in that and a certain excitement."

Hew sat up straight and collected his thoughts. "I've often dreamed of buying a nine mm automatic pistol, capturing an editor of one of the larger publishing houses and holding him or her hostage until one of my novels is on the bookstore shelves.

"At other times, I've wanted to get a hold of an army surplus flame-thrower, sneak into a bookstore after it was closed and torch the whole thing.

"And, when in my darkest moods, I've wanted to murder a best- selling author, just shoot him or her down right in the middle of a book signing, and, in that way, get my revenge on the literary world for not letting me into it!"

Pain filled his expression, but he fought it down and smiled again.

"You can't recriminate yourself for having such thoughts," Giovani said, "that's pathological guilt. It's guilt that leads to no resolution, for no constructive purpose, for something you've not even done."

He answered. "Though your opinions are expertly thought out, in this instance I must disagree with them, for it is not guilt that upsets me about these fantasies of mine, but their sheer necessity. They remind me, acutely, that I'm to remain in the realm of literary oblivion forever."

Not three miles from the hospital bed Mr. Samuelson sat in, a drama of a different sort unfolded. A fifteen-year-old girl, a runaway, argued fiercely with her pimp after he had claimed that the tally of drugs and money she had been looking after was short. He blamed her for the deficiency.

After shouts and threats, the pimp chased her into the streets, meaning to beat the truth from her. He was so enraged that he might have hospitalized or even killed her, but the car hit her first.

So late at night, neither the fear-stricken pedestrian nor the sleepy motorist expected the other. The car got a two-hundred- dollar dent in its fender; the girl got two broken ribs from the car and a major concussion from the

pavement when she landed, thirty feet from initial impact.

The driver, though aware of possible lawsuits, stopped to help. He saw the pimp and called to him, scaring him back into the building. The driver thought of calling an ambulance, but couldn't be sure if any of the pay-phones in the neighborhood would work, or if any of the fearful inhabitants of the area would allow a stranger into their homes to use the telephone. No police were in sight. So the driver gently picked the girl up and carefully put her in the back seat of his car, then took her to County General Psychiatric and the gentle ministrations of Tze and Giovani.

"What was all the commotion about this morning?" asked Samuelson.

"Another patient was brought in," Giovani said, as she pushed his wheelchair toward the cafeteria. "A girl, in her middle teens, was struck by a car. The poor kid is in a coma. But Dr. Tze feels that her chances are fair-to-good. The doctor even has us play a radio for her to help bring her out of it. She's that close to consciousness."

"Wouldn't it be better if someone spoke or read to her?"

"Of course, the personal touch is always better, but we haven't the staff to spare to do it, nor have any interested relatives or friends come forward to sit with her."

Samuelson sat in his chair silent. When they had almost reached the cafeteria, he suddenly motioned for Ann to stop, got out of the wheelchair, took it from her, pushed it back to his room, and loaded his suitcases into it. "Where is this girl now?"

"She's in the next wing," Ann said, "but that's a woman's ward. You can't go in there."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Samuelson. "Let me see this unfortunate child."

Ann sighed, seeing his enthusiasm. "I'll try."

Giovani had to call Dr. Tze at her home for the authorization to allow a male patient on a female ward, but the doctor not only approved the plan, she expressed greater enthusiasm for it than Mr. Samuelson had.

And so it was permitted.

Mr. Samuelson placed his chair close to the comatose girl's bed; his suitcases were within easy reach and unlocked.

"Hi," he said. "I'm the story man, here to tell you tales that I hope you'll find at least interesting.

"I realize that your parents, wise in their advice, must have warned you not to talk to strangers, but I think we can have an exception in this case. I live right here at the hospital, the doctors and nurses know I'm in your room, and we'll leave the door open while I tell you my stories."

He reached into his neatly ordered suitcase and drew out a folder labeled number one, a short story he wrote when he was seventeen years old.

"Once upon a time..."

The first day he recited to her for over ten hours, only pausing to take some hot tea for his raw throat.

The girl, locked in a dark, velvet cell they called coma, listened. She knew they were words, but couldn't understand them.

They fluttered away from her mind's grasp like butterflies on a breeze.

Occasionally, a word would touch the edge of her memory, like the half-recalled name of a distant acquaintance.

Then, suddenly, a few at a time, the words started to click into place, to arrange themselves meaningfully in the picture-puzzle of her mind. She heard 'unicorn' and knew

what it was; consequently she had to know what horse and horn were as well. Then the unicorn appeared to her, she could see it clearly, almost touch it. It was fabulous, beautiful! And when the unicorn spoke to her a whole world appeared around it, as if from the shroud of a mist. It was a world that welcomed her, where she could be more than just some meat, where she had a soul, where she could fight back. She was a fairy princess in the unicorn's world, a wielder of magic, pure, unsoiled and untouched.

There were horrible things in this world as well: giants, dragons, witches, demons, false-knights; but they were counterweighed by heroes, good wizards and benign sorceresses. She didn't always defeat the monsters in this bright world of magic, but the girl at least had a sword to fight with.

Page after page he journeyed, taking her along with him. She toured his literary world as if he had made it just for her.

The girl tolerated the discomforts of the comatose: the intravenous needle, the naso-gastric feeding tube, the electroencephalograph wires, the bed pan and the catheter, and dared not open her eyes, even when she felt she could, quite easily, even just to look at the Story-man; for she feared that if she did, and he found out she was no longer fully unconscious, that he'd stop holding her hand and stop telling her stories.

In all her years of brutal intimacy, no one ever simply held her hand and talked to her.

Exhaustion forced him to finish his first day's reading. He reassured the girl of his return after food and rest. The images his stories created remained with her; they filled her sleep, and half-sleep, with beautiful dreams.

Hours of reading became days; Samuelson exhausted his supply of short stories and began on his novels, hoping that the slower pace of the longer works didn't bore her.

The girl was pleased that he now read things that didn't end so quickly. The short stories were like pleasant acquaintances, the novels were to become like old friends.

He finished five novels in as many days.

Then, near the climax of his sixth novel, during a particularly dramatic paragraph, he noticed that she gasped and her eyes fluttered. He knew that she was waking up, and he became afraid.

Carefully, while still reading aloud, he packed up his work and walked to the door. When he was out in the hall, he turned and said, "I'm sorry, but there is no more for me to read, that was my last paragraph."

Startled, the girl called out to him, but only heard his footsteps receding down the hall. She was too weak to get up and follow.

Mr. Samuelson returned to his own ward and confronted Ms. Giovani.

"Can you release me from here, now?" he asked. "The girl is awake."

"You're free to leave anytime you wish," she told him.

"Good, then open the door please."

"Wait just a moment," she said, then telephoned the girl's ward for a report on her condition.

"You're right Mr. Samuelson," she said. "The girl is awake, and she's asking for you."

"No," he said firmly. "I've forced that poor child to listen to my weird, unsold stories for weeks; she may have hated them all and is waiting to tell me so, I couldn't take that."

"Now you're being ridiculous," Giovani said. "I'm sure she's very grateful to you for all you've done for her."

"Gratitude is not the same thing as literary appreciation."

"I heard some of your stories, Mr. Samuelson, and I thought they were very good. You should submit them."

"I haven't the strength to endure another rejection slip."

"Ah, but maybe the next one won't be rejected," she said.

"I've told myself that for the last five decades. No, it is over. But thanks for your encouragement anyway, and thanks for letting me read my stories to the girl. I'll be a little happier knowing that my words have done someone some good."

"It is we who owe you the thanks."

"How could I resist a captive audience?" he smiled.

Ms. Giovani opened the door and watched him walk away, dragging his suitcases along. And, even though he never wandered more than twenty miles from CCP, she never saw him again.

The girl recovered quickly and left the hospital; she only returned to the streets long enough to search for the Story-man, but never found him.

She finished high school and worked her way through a state university, studying literature. She became a writer, composing stories that came to her like remembered dreams. By her twenty-eighth birthday, she had sold her first novel, entitled "The Last Paragraph."

PSYCHE'S MARRIAGE

by Joe R. Christopher

Let's celebrate the marriage of rare Psyche–
Or god or monster in her bed, how liked she!
"I do not care to *see* my husband nightly,"
Said she, "so long as he can long excite me!"